Continuing Controversy

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Abby Mann, the screenwriter and director, and the center of controversy over the film "King," said accusations that he has demeaned Martin Luther King Jr. "will come back to haunt" the critics.

"I am proudest of this film, more than any other work," Mann said in a telephone interview from Paramount Studios in Hollywood, where the filming is being completed. "King," a six-hour docu-drama, will be shown on NBC early next year.

"Martin King is not shown as weak or cowardly in any way. Because of his eloquence, his courage, because he put principles above himself, I think he's the greatest American of this century. The film shows that."

Earlier this week, several former associates of King, men who had worked with the civil rights leader at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) accused the filmmakers of distorting his character, even to the point of painting him as a puppet of whites. "They've got Martin coming off as shallow, uncertain, kind of frightened, unopinionated," said former SCLC offical Hosea Williams.

About two years before King was assassinated in 1968, Mann recalled yesterday, the two men met. King expressed his admiration for "Judgment at Nuremberg," Mann's Oscar-winning adaptation, and said he hoped Mann would do a film on him. "He personally said that racism, poverty and the evil of Vietnam were the main points and I have built the film around those issues," said Mann. He added that he had consulted with Coretta King, the civil rights leader's widow, Stanley Levision, a principal fund-raiser for the SCLC, and Andrew Young, an aide of King's who is now U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

"I'm sure the critics wanted to be treated more prominently in the film," said Mann. "But I am also sure their accusations will come back to haunt them." —*Jacqueline Trescott*